

Was the Tale a Women's Genre? Tellers, Collectors, and Writers of Tales in 19th-Century Hungary

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ABSTRACT

In 1858 a leading Hungarian literary critic as well as collector and editor of folk poetry started a debate about the possible literary career of women, arguing that literature and other forms of public artistic activity are fields that should not be open to women as it may cause serious moral and social problems. Yet, he noted that in case women still insist on becoming literary authors, they should turn only to certain genres, such as tales. The article investigates how the tale became a gendered genre, and presents women tellers, collectors and writers of tales as well as the diverse ways they were represented in Hungarian culture in the 19th century.

KEYWORDS

folk and fairy tales, women's writing, gendered genre, Hungarian literature and folklore, 19th century

In this paper, I try to explore whether, in light of folklore studies, the tale was a women's genre in 19th-century Hungarian society. The gendered aspects of the genre of tale can be examined through the possible actors, that is, along the lines of characters, storytellers, collectors, editors, writers, illustrators, researchers, or audiences; here, I focus on the tellers, collectors, and writers of tales. Conversely, I look at how the notion of the tale being a gendered genre, a form of expression particularly suitable for women developed in 19th-century Hungarian culture, and why it was the tale that became one of the suggested/authorized literary genres for (middle-class) women who aspired to be literary authors.

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WOMEN AND TALES: A LITERARY PROPOSAL FROM 1858

Pál Gyulai, the most influential Hungarian literary critic of the second half of the 19th century published in 1858 a highly polemical paper on women writers in response to Flóra Majthényi's book of poems¹ and Júlia Szendrey's translations of Andersen's tales.² According to the premise of Gyulai's review, although the intellectual abilities of women are equal to those of men, they are of a different nature, therefore "no matter how great a talent a woman may have, neither in affairs of the state, nor in literature, nor in science can she rise to the same rank as a man of similar talent" (GYULAI [1858]1908:274).³ To Gyulai, women were by nature incapable of deep thinking and sustained intellectual work, thus it was unnecessary for them to enter these fields. On the other hand, regardless of the (already dubious) quality of such intellectual or artistic work, leaving the family circle and entering the public eye entails both objectification and exposure: the woman's actions, effect, and judgment are beyond her control, and she may receive a kind of attention and gaze that can have devastating existential and moral consequences – at least that is what the word *danger* that keeps popping up in Gyulai's review suggests.

Gyulai's article stems from the perception of a significant socio-cultural shift: the level of literacy in Hungarian society was quite low until the late 19th century; secondary institutions for the education of women were only established sporadically from the 1830s, but even those almost exclusively for girls from the affluent middle and upper classes. Thus, after the age of 10–12, only a small segment of women received formal education, and even in most middle-class families, from that point forward, girls were typically educated with the goal of providing a suitable level of household management, perhaps with private tutors at home, within the family circle. According to statistics, in 1870, only 25% of women could read and write (KARÁDY 1994).

¹Flóra Majthényi (1837–1915) came from a noble, wealthy family, her poems had been published in newspapers since age 14. Her first book of poems was published in 1858 under the title *Flóra 50 költeménye* [50 poems of Flóra], at which time she was already a well-known poet thanks to her numerous published works. From 1856, her husband Kálmán Tóth, one of the best known poets of the era, was a newspaper editor, whom she divorced in 1868 (GYIMESI 2019).

²The father of Júlia Szendrey (1828–1868) was a steward of the estates of aristocratic families. In 1847, Júlia Szendrey married Sándor Petőfi, who has been one of the most prominent authors in the Hungarian literary canon ever since, as well as a cultural and political icon. Júlia Szendrey's first writings (e.g., her diary) were published during her short marriage to Petőfi. Petőfi immortalized their relationship in many poems. After Petőfi's tragic death in 1849 in the war of independence, she married university professor Árpád Horvát in 1850. Júlia Szendrey's second marriage was condemned by the public because of the cult that had formed around Petőfi. Júlia Szendrey started publishing again in the late 1850s, mainly writing poems on motherhood and her unhappiness. Her book of translations of Andersen's tales was published at the end of 1857. She herself wrote several tales that reflect Andersen's influence. Her younger sister was married to Pál Gyulai. Towards the end of her life, Júlia Szendrey separated from her second husband, with whom she lived in an unhappy marriage. Both Flóra Majthényi's divorce and Júlia Szendrey's second marriage and subsequent separation from her husband were considered scandalous and norm violating actions in the era and also influenced their literary careers (stigmatization, isolation, reticence). Due to their origins, both authors received a better than average education and were connected to literary life through their spouses and relatives (GYIMESI 2019; GULYÁS 2020).

³In 1858, Pál Gyulai's article was originally published as a series in the daily *Pesti Napló* under the title *Flóra 50 költeménye. Andersen meséi* [50 poems by Flóra. Andersen's Tales]. For my paper, the quotes are taken from Pál Gyulai's collected essays published as *Kritikai dolgozatok* [Critical essays]. A volume of studies on the interpretation of Pál Gyulai's paper on women writers: TÖRÖK 2016.



The 1850–1860s was the era in Hungarian culture when middle-class women stepped into the public eye as literary authors (as well as translators and magazine editors)—previously there were only a few examples of this kind of engagement. Confronting the argumentation that Gyulai presented could intensify the *anxiety of authorship* (GILBERT – GUBAR 1979) in women writers at this uncertain, initial stage.

However, as far as the possible relationship between women writers and the genre of tale was concerned, Pál Gyulai proved to be more permissive at this point and offered a proposal as follows: “[women] should limit themselves to topics that best match their nature and talent and are most compatible with their vocation and duties, because they can never be the same. (...) A smart and educated mother certainly gains more experience around her children, around children in general, than fathers and most educators, yet women are the least capable of writing a truly good work about education. That would require abstraction, a philosophical mind, and erudition, which a woman does not possess and cannot acquire. (...) *However, due to her predicament, disposition, and temperament, she is very capable of writing tales and short stories for children, especially young girls, and perhaps even better than men.* It is a shame that the more talented and intelligent she is, the more she scorns this field. Abroad, one might come across some who successfully cultivate this important branch of literature, but not in our country, because no one is lauded for such in fashion magazines, nor their portrait published, and so forth (GYULAI [1858]1908:285, 286, emphasis mine – GJ).

According to this argument, the tale is a genre that corresponds to the biologically and socially determined character of women, or, with some restrictions within this category, “smart and educated mothers,” so in this case, middle-class women. To interpret this statement, it may be worth considering the fact that Pál Gyulai was one of the few Hungarian intellectuals of the era who not only had a favorable opinion but also a thorough knowledge of the genre of tale, as his interest in this subject was very wide-ranging. He collected folktales in Transylvania in the mid-1840s as a student, then at the turn of the 1850 and 1860s as a teacher at the Reformed College in Kolozsvár (Cluj). From the 1840s, he published some of the tales transcribed from oral tradition as literary works in verse or prose form. In 1861–1862, some of his narrative poems were published under the genre designation of *folktale* or *allegory* in the literary magazine of János Arany, the most important poet of the era (DOMOKOS 2015:223–227, 241–262), in line with the editorial concept recognizing the significance of folk poetry in shaping native-language children’s literature.⁴ Gyulai also published reviews of Hungarian folktale collections that fundamentally influenced subsequent canonization. As editor of the representative series *Magyar Népköltési Gyűjtemény* [Collection of Hungarian Folk Poetry], commissioned by the Kisfaludy Társaság, which coordinated folklore collections from the 1840s, he played at least as significant

⁴In 1861, János Arany, the editor of *Szépirodalmi Figyelő* (Literary Observer), added the following note to Pál Gyulai’s poem *A tyúk és a farkasverem* (*Népmese*) [The Hen and the Wolf Pit (Folktale)] (ATU 20C): “We are delighted to welcome this naive tale to the wasteland of our children’s literature (not *childish*, but *childlike*). Those who would belittle its place in a literary magazine should remember that even Pushkin did not consider it undignified to elaborate folktales.” (ARANY J. 1963:288). The expressions *belittlement* and *undignified* in János Arany’s text also indicate the Hungarian public opinion of the time regarding a tale’s value (or rather the lack of value). Indeed, not only János Arany but also his son, László Arany, had a high opinion of Pushkin’s tales: “Pushkin went among the living folk, into the huts of the simple peasants, in search of his subject, and he took the lowly, scorned, disdained folktale under his powerful protective wings, and elaborated it with such poetry, cast it in such a pure folk yet artistic form, like no one, ever, anywhere.” (ARANY L. 1900:51).



a role in creating and implementing a kind of concept of folk poetry as he did with his normative criticism in the field of literature, as well as in the professionalization of literary and folklore research through important positions he held in the emerging institutional system of literary studies (T. SZABÓ 2017).

At the same time, Pál Gyulai was also aware that his high regard for tales was shared by few of his compatriots, and that the value of the genre of tale in contemporary Hungarian society was highly dubious (GULYÁS 2021a). As he himself summed up the Hungarian public opinion in 1862: “folktales are disdained even by the less educated” (GYULAI 1862b:386). Regarding the chances of tales being published and their presence on the book market, his comment on publications of folk poetry in general stands: “and the public did not buy books in order to read about the things servants and children were chattering about at home” (GYULAI 1862b:386). The fact that the tale was a genre of low value to both writers and the reading public not only as a part of folklore but also as part of literature is also clear from Gyulai’s paper on women writers when he presents public opinion: just as *disdain* is used in relation to folktales, the word *scorn* appears in relation to tales written for “children, especially young girls.”

From the middle of the 19th century, tales would basically be interpreted in the context of folk poetry and/or children’s/youth literature in Hungarian culture, identified as a genre for peasants/servants and/or children.⁵ This classification is also reflected in Pál Gyulai’s 1866 short story *Egy anya* [A Mother]: “[The mother] bought a pile of children’s books and picture books. She didn’t intend to teach her son to read, that was for later, but she herself wanted to learn fairy tales and children’s stories so that she could tell them to her child. The evenings, especially the long winter evenings, were spent with such storytelling. Aladár [her son] did not much enjoy this new entertainment. The widow was annoyed and could not understand that when Péter [the old hussar serving at the house] or Boris [the cook] were telling stories of Panczi-Manczi, the Little Haggis, or King Kaczor, Aladár was all ears, but he yawned or fell asleep while listening to the tales inspired by her expensive books. (...) ‘Shall I tell you a story, my dear son? – asked the mother, sitting by her son’s bed – I also know a good story, not just Péter, not just Boris. I also know the tale of Panczi-Manczi, I also know the tale of Kaczor! Shall I tell you? I’ll also tell you a new one, a nice new story about “The weed and the little bird.” Shall I tell it then? Well, I won’t tell you if you don’t wish” (GYULAI 1866:110, 112 – parenthetical remarks mine – GJ).

All the tales indicated in Gyulai’s short story are folktales (*Panczi-Manczi*: ATU 500+501, *Kis Gömböcz* [Little Haggis]: ATU 2028*, *Kaczor király* [King Kaczor]: ATU 103A*, *Kóró s a kis madár* [The Weed and the Little Bird]: ATU 2034A*), and, with one exception, they can be found in László Arany’s collection *Eredeti népmesék* [Authentic Folktales] published a few years earlier, in 1862 — the collection of tales that Gyulai rated very highly in comparison to previous Hungarian folktale collections, especially because of its excellent narrative mode (GYULAI 1862b; GULYÁS 2021b). The mentioned exception is the tale called *King Kaczor*, which is from the Cluj folklore collection of Pál Gyulai (ARANY – GYULAI 1872:433–437). At this point, it is worth noting the extremely important role in the positive turn in the evaluation of the folktale played by an interpretive community comprising Pál Gyulai (as literary critic), János Arany (as the era’s most significant Hungarian poet who dedicated special attention to folk poetry), and his son, László

⁵On servants as agents of oral storytelling and cultural mediators between different social groups in 19th-century France, see HOPKIN 2018.



Arany (folktale collector and editor of one of the most influential collections of Hungarian folktales; DOMOKOS 2021) in the second half of the 19th century (GULYÁS 2021a).

There are three storytellers in Pál Gyulai's short story: the former hussar, the cook, and the "educated mother" (a captain's widow). These three characters roughly correspond to the 19th-century stereotypes of the main types of Hungarian storytellers (soldier, handmaid/nanny, mother). In this case, the medium of sharing the tales is orality, and the target audience is children who cannot yet read. The hussar and the cook build a repertoire of tales through oral tradition, the middle-class mother through the medium of literature (story books, including folktales); moreover, the goal is to create the experience of *storytelling*, not by reading the printed text aloud but by its memorization and oral performance. In the excerpt, there is a clear qualitative difference between the written (authored) tales and the oral folktales – at least from the perspective of the receiver – in favor of the folktales. At the same time, the train of thought basically establishes the double status of the tale: it is categorized as either folk poetry or as children's literature, so all in all, a genre for people who do not (yet) engage in elite culture.

When in 1858 Gyulai designated the tale as a genre suitable for publication by presumably middle class (that is, not simply literate but educated) women writers, he offered a kind of utilitarian concept of women's writing, because he designated the place of tale writing not within autotelic literature but within the framework of literature with a pedagogical purpose—children's and young adult literature. It was at this time, in the second half of the 19th century, that the tale became either a part of folklore and/or children's literature in Hungarian culture and started waning from the autonomous genre options of high literature. This option for literature used to exist, as evidenced by texts with a firm position in the Hungarian literary canon, such as Mihály Vörösmarty's philosophical drama *Csongor és Tünde* [Csongor and Tünde] (1830), Sándor Petőfi's *János vitéz (népmese)* [John the valiant (folktale)] (1845), or János Arany's *Rózsa és Ibolya (népmese)* [Rózsa and Ibolya (folktale)] (1847), all latter narrative poems and the drama inspired by fairy tales (GULYÁS 2010).

But for representatives of the elite culture in the Hungarian society of the 19th century, the tale was still basically a genre that was associated with those excluded from elite culture, that is, children, women, servants, peasants, even though men who in the modern age could be considered lettered (i.e., educated in higher education boarding schools) made use of it—yet, for a long time, there was no trace of this in manuscript or printed literature intended for the public. Thus, the tale was not necessarily a women's genre; at most in the sense that a significant number of women lived only in the culture of the popular little tradition – using Peter Burke's terms – isolated from the great tradition of the elite, while educated men were bi-cultural, being familiar with both traditions and alternating between them according to the occasion, public, and institution.⁶

That the appreciation of tales and storytelling depended primarily on the level of education is vividly illustrated in several scenes of the satirical drama *A méla Tempefői, avagy Az is bolond, aki poétává lesz Magyarországon* [The Gloomy Tempefői, or Foolish is He Who Becomes a Poet in Hungary], written in 1793 by Mihály Csokonai Vitéz (the most significant Hungarian poet of

⁶“Most noblewomen were equally cut off (from the great tradition), because it was rare for them to have much formal education. Perhaps one should see noblewomen as mediators between the group to which they belonged socially, the elite, and the group to which they belonged culturally, the non-elite.” (BURKE 2009:55).



the late 18th century), which depicts two sisters' different views on fairy tales. In Count Fegyverneki's country mansion, Countess Éva summons Szuszmír, the fireplace attendant, and commands him to tell a tale. The significance of the fragmentary tale presented by Csokonai is considerable: on the one hand, it is one of the earliest fairy tale texts in Hungarian literature (from the 18th century, there are less than a dozen Hungarian fairy tales known), and on the other hand, it is an authentic imitation of oral storytelling, conveying in a way that was rare in this period the particular features and circumstances of the storyteller's language use, as well as the dialogue between the storyteller and his audience.

Miss Éva listens to the tale attentively, and recommends it to her sister, Miss Rozália, who is highly educated and always reads poetry, in the following way: "You have never heard anything so beautiful, I would listen to it all day long, even going hungry and thirsty. Just listen, you shall see how beautiful it is." Rozália, however, a consumer of the products of elite culture, has a completely different opinion of the value of fairy tales: "vulgarity," "wretched tales," "prattling," "tale concocted by a lowly soul," "the product of a feeble mind," etc. After this, the sisters' debate revolves around the meaning and utility of storytelling and the cultural and social role of noble-born and/or noble-minded women (CSOKONAI VITÉZ 1978:22–30, 288–289). It might be added that even though in this specific situation Miss Rozália puts an end to the storytelling authoritatively, as the drama vividly illustrates, in the late 18th century it was she, the woman reading Voltaire's poems, who was considered a norm-violating oddity, in terms of cultural needs, not just in this particular noble mansion but in Hungarian society in general.

As we will see below, whether it was a storyteller's portrayal as an illiterate, old peasant woman, or tale writing being recommended for middle-class women, in the 19th century, the figure of the child was usually associated with women, representing the cultural continuity between generations, the transmission of traditions, and the socializing role of the family. This way, women were represented as having a mediating role in the transmission of traditional narratives. Moreover, neither the woman nor the tale stand on their own. From the essentialist point of view, a woman can fulfill her existence by being a mother (or to put it another way, motherhood gives her existence a distinctive meaning). And the fairy tale, which is basically a genre of pure fiction for its own sake, becomes a (more or less didactic) tool of socialization, a mediator of civic norms and patriotic values to be learned via mother tongue education, in line with one of the main tasks of middle-class women in this period.

WOMEN STORYTELLERS IN MODERN EUROPEAN LITERATURE

When and how did storytelling and storytellers become important to representatives of elite culture? Recording tales from oral tradition in Europe became programmatic upon the publication of the collection of the Brothers Grimm titled *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (KHM, 1812–1815). As is well known, Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm presented themselves as documenters and analysts of the folk traditions that preserved pre-Christian pagan mythology and narratives (and thus embodied national character), while highlighting with unprecedented fervor the preciousness of this tale tradition, which must be studied, preserved, and salvaged. Their mythological concept of folktales, linked with the search for national traditions, acted as an initiator for the collection of folktales throughout Europe and had a great impact on the interpretation of folktales.



The *Urfassung*⁷ (original manuscript) of their collection was discovered in the first half of the 20th century, thus making possible a comparative study of their sources, their first manuscript version, and the published texts (RÖLLEKE 1975). One of the lessons of this was that the brothers, especially Wilhelm Grimm, carefully and systematically formed the source texts, obscuring the intertextual relationships with earlier and contemporary written sources, creating the illusion of orality and of folk speech in the scribal medium: “This rhetoric legitimates the notion that folk renditions are fully accessible to scholars and, at least ideally, fully reproducible in printed texts; it also provides a powerful means of according textual authority in the form of *authenticity* to the scholar’s production and reception of texts” (BRIGGS 1993:397). The other lesson is that a significant portion of the informants for a volume that was intended to represent German folktales was actually bourgeois or noble ladies from their sister Charlotte’s friends, who, as descendants of Huguenot families, were partly socialized on the French fairy tale tradition (RÖLLEKE 1986; BLACKWELL 1987:163). However, the Brothers Grimm did not publicly name their informants, with one exception: Frau Viehmann, “the peasant woman” (*Bäuerin*), was not only named but also at length mentioned in the preface of their work in 1815, and her portrait as *Märchenfrau* was also included in the front matter of several editions of their book (WARNER 1995:189–193).

With this gesture, they established a powerful conceptual and iconographic tradition: the figure of the storytelling old woman. As revealed by Willem de Blécourt, in 19th-century German culture, male storytellers were mostly depicted in an exotic (oriental) context, whereas it was not just the emblematic German storyteller of the Brothers Grimm that was depicted as an old woman in her rural home: the image of an old woman or grandmother telling stories to children in a rural environment (at the edge of a forest, in a meadow) surrounded by domestic animals became a paradigmatic portrayal. This image effectively linked women and storytelling – pictured in a certain way (BLÉCOURT 2010). By giving prominence to the sole elderly, lower-class woman among their informants while leaving the middle-class young ladies in the shadows, the Brothers Grimm both connected to an existing tradition and created a new one. The expression *old wives’ tale* (*anilis fabula*) has been in use since antiquity; it has existed in the form of *dajkamese* in Hungarian, *Ammenmärchen* in German, *old wives’ tales* in English, and usually gave women’s storytelling a negative connotation (WARNER 1995:12–26).

For the Grimms, linking the image of the simple old woman with storytelling was of a different nature, and it lined up closely with their tale interpretation. The tale was a genre known in almost all European social strata in the 18th–19th centuries, but the highly influential Grimmian understanding of tales attributed to the folktale (which lived in orality) a transcending meaning pointing beyond itself, according to which it expressed the nation’s past, traditions, language, and spirit: that is, they endowed the tale with specific value, while also interpreting it exclusively as folk poetry, thus narrowing its scope of use. The folk origin, the low social position of the storyteller, the peasant, i.e., agrarian, close-to-nature, and less mobile way of life were all guarantees of the survival of an ancient, autochthonous tradition that was independent of literacy and free from external, foreign influences (ABRAHAMS 1993). And if peasants were in general isolated from the written (and therefore international) great tradition, uneducated

⁷Online availability of manuscripts, e-codices, Virtual Manuscript Library of Switzerland, Fondation Martin Bodmer, Cologny: <https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/fmb/ms-Grimm-G-072-001>. accessed: January 12, 2023.



peasant women cut off from the prospect of spatial or cultural mobility were all the more excluded from it (BURKE 2009:81–85). Therefore, the essentialist portrayal of storytellers as old peasant women could also be a kind of authentication tool: a guarantee that readers are presented with texts transcribed from the bearers of an ancient, uncorrupted, pure tradition.⁸ In the first half of the 19th century, most readers of KHM were either educated men, understanding the tales as part of national traditions, or rather, in accordance with the title *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, young or middle-aged, middle-class mothers or governesses.

There may have been other options for the portrayal of women storytellers, and indeed there were. In the Middle Eastern tale tradition, the narrator of the *One Thousand and One Nights*, Scheherazade, is the daughter of the king's vizier – according to the frame narrative – who has read many historical and literary works.⁹ Although in 20th century Euro-American visual art and popular culture Scheherazade was often depicted as a particularly beautiful, sensual, seductive woman, this portrayal is not supported by Arab sources: in them, this young woman is not characterized by her appearance but by her outstanding intellect and education (MARZOLPH 2004a, 2004b). In the case of *One Thousand and One Nights*, the captivating power of a woman's storytelling in the shadow of death is stronger than the will of a ruler with political and military power.

Similarly, the narrators of European tales were not always depicted as simple old women telling stories in a family circle. One of the earliest European collections of short stories, which contains dozens of stories whose subjects are identical to texts recorded centuries later as folktales from the oral tradition, Giovan Francesco Straparola's work *Le piacevoli notti*, published in Venice in 1551–1553, presents the narratives as the result of the social gathering of several narrators, in line with Boccaccio's narrative tradition. As is well known in *The Decameron* the one hundred stories are framed by the conversation and storytelling of seven noble young ladies (known as Pampinea, Fiammetta, Filomena, Emilia, etc.) and three young men who fled to their country estates from the Florentine plague of 1348.¹⁰ According to the fiction of *Piacevoli notti*, on the island of Murano, in the villa of Ottaviano Maria Sforza and his daughter, Lucrezia, who were forced to flee from Milan, a group of educated men (poets, scholars, knights) and young women gathers during carnival, entertaining themselves over thirteen nights with storytelling, riddles, dancing, and singing. The narratives, i.e., tales, are told in large part by ten witty, charming ladies (also referred to only by their first names: Lodovica, Lionora, Alteria, Lauretta, Eritrea, etc.), who, according to the narrator of the introduction, were Lucrezia Sforza's ladies-in-waiting (STRAPAROLA 2015).

Giambattista Basile's work *Lo cunto de li cunti ovvero lo trattenimento de peccerille* was published posthumously in Naples in 1634–1636, and all of its fifty stories can be matched to the types of tales recorded later from oral tradition. According to the frame story, Prince Tadeo summons the ten “most expert and quick-tongued” tale-tellers of the city, fulfilling the wishes of

⁸Cf. “The old woman had been the preferred mask of the storyteller in the seventeenth century, but in the late eighteenth she ideally spoke as if she were still a child, from the memories of her infancy, which tallied, in the perspective of romanticism, with the childhood of the culture itself, before it became corrupt” (WARNER 1995:189–190).

⁹“Shahrazad had read books and histories, of past kings and stories of earlier peoples, having collected, it was said, a thousand volumes of these, covering peoples, kings and poets” (*The Arabian Nights...* 2008).

¹⁰A peculiar aspect of the connection between Boccaccio's narratives and women's storytelling: in Transylvania, starting in 1918, Klára Győri told folklorized versions of Boccaccio's stories for four decades to women in the spinning room of Szék (Sic). NAGY O. 1983.



his pregnant wife, who longs to listen to tales. In Basile's work – presumably in an ironic reference to the more intellectually sophisticated narrators of the genre tradition inspired by Boccaccio's work – each of the ten storytellers is a repulsive and plain woman: “lame Zeza, twisted Cecca, goitered Meneca, big-nosed Tolla, hunchback Popa, drooling Antonella, snout-faced Ciulla, cross-eyed Paola, mangy Ciommetella, and shitty Iacova” (BASILE 2007). Despite the subtitle of this great work of Italian baroque literature, it does not contain tales that would have been told to children (not least because fiction specifically for children did not really exist in this period), but is rather a collection of subversive, ironic, highly rhetorical texts.

The frame narratives of 14th–17th century Western European collections presented above evoke the situation of *oral* storytelling in social togetherness. The narrators and storytellers usually include educated noble ladies who command the respect and adoration of the men (the only exception being the ill-bred, disfigured storytellers of the parodistic *Pentameron*), who tell their stories for the entertainment of an adult audience, i.e., themselves and the men present. In contrast, the 19th-century image of the old peasant woman surrounded by children depicted a desexualized woman who lived for the family and the passing on of tradition (BLÉCOURT 2010).

Through the highly influential work of the Brothers Grimm, the figure of the elderly and presumably/hopefully illiterate (peasant) woman telling stories in the family circle, primarily to children, came to the fore, and the figure of the young, educated, upper-class woman telling and writing tales was relegated to the background—even though, as we have seen, there was a solid tradition of depicting women narrators as belonging to the latter group, and one of the fundamental sources of the 18th–19th century Western European fairy tale tradition (and many of the Grimms' informants of French origin) was, in fact, the work of the aristocratic ladies of the late *Ancien Régime*.

WOMEN AS WRITERS OF FAIRY TALES

In European literature, fairy tales (*tales of magic* or *eigentliche Märchen*) were published in book form in the 16th and 17th centuries in Venice and Naples, but it seems that the real vogue of writing fairy tales began in France in the 1690s. The authors of the *contes de fées*, with the exception of Charles Perrault, were mostly aristocratic women (M^{me} d'Aulnoy, M^{lle} Lhéritier, M^{lle} Bernard, M^{lle} de La Force, M^{me} Durand, M^{me} de Murat, M^{me} Villeneuve, M^{me} Leprince de Beaumont, etc.). Women writers saw the fairy tale as an experimental genre, and their works of complex structures, full of self-reflexive and metanarrative clauses, depicted and criticized the power relations and behavioral forms of the court of Louis XIV. This was made possible by the fairy tale genre that existed on the fringes of the contemporary genre canon. Perrault's style, on the other hand, was markedly different from that of women writers: his short, simple stories concluded with versified morals.

As explored by Elizabeth Wanning Harries (HARRIES 2003:19–72), in the front matter of their books, French women writers presented themselves as learned and attractive women, that is, the iconography of the woman writing the tale was clearly different from the visual depiction of the woman telling the tale, for example, on the title page of Perrault's 1697 book of tales, *Les Contes de ma mère l'Oye*: a plainly dressed spinner telling a story to fashionably dressed children while sitting by the obligatory fireplace and the inevitable cat. Aristocratic women writers, argues Harries, did not write their fairy tales for children, and their narrative style was not intended to



imitate the oral tradition of lower classes. The tales of Charles Perrault intended to represent the naivety and simplicity of oral tradition of the folk, were the products of this same creative process. From this period on, there was a growing tendency to associate orality with originality, closeness to nature, naivety, and spontaneity, while writing with consciousness, artificiality, and craftedness; as a result, by the 19th century, only one subcategory of oral communication, i.e., the oral tradition of the “folk” was actually deemed valuable and therefore an element worthy of documentation (and later idealization).

The fairy tales of French women writers were extremely successful in Europe, becoming popular quickly, and together with the translations/adaptations of the Oriental tale collections published in the first decades of the 18th century, they dictated narrative fashion (GRÄTZ 1988). This fashion reached the Hungarian-speaking area – via German mediation – in the last decades of the 18th century, through translations, adaptations, and cheap chapbooks. The Brothers Grimm, who had a fundamental influence on the collection and interpretation of tales in the 19th century, criticized this fairy tale tradition for its artificiality, as it differed from the narrative style of their invention (presented not as artistic creations but as a documentation of folktales), which was indeed simple and naïve—the imitation of (folk) orality yielded and authenticated such a narrative style. As Harries claims, the rise of this stylistic ideal of tales was partly the reason for the works of French women tale writers having been marginalized by the middle of the 19th century.

For the women tale writers of the *Ancien Régime*, the tale was more of a literary art form that was one of the narrative forms of the sophisticated, witty, linguistically conscious oral communication practiced in aristocratic salons and the royal court. We might add that conversation required skills, as well as learnable behavior and knowledge, due to which it was seen in the early modern period as a form of *verbal art*,¹¹ in a similar way that folk storytelling or ballad singing were seen later, after the creation of the concept of *Volkspoesie*. French women writers were also familiar with earlier tale collections (the works of Straparola and Basile) and did not feel the need to keep these literary precedents from the readers (BOTTFIGHEIMER 2012). The plots of many of their tales match internationally known tale types, but the authorial formation of the texts is reflected in both their composition and their narrative mode.

WOMEN AS WRITERS OF TALES IN HUNGARY

As for Hungarian parallels, women as authors of prose epic works entered the literary field only in the second half of the 19th century.¹² Therefore, the collection of texts published in 1829 under the name of *Vilma* (that is, Krisztina Szemere, 1792–1828) in the yearbook *Muzárion, Élet és Literatura* [Muzarion, Life and Literature] has a special status as being a fairly early publication. In addition to poems in Hungarian and German, the posthumous publication of the writer from one of the oldest Hungarian noble families, previously known for her sonnets,

¹¹On the importance of the art of conversation in early modern Europe, see BURKE 1993. For that matter, in his polemic on women writers, Pál Gyulai also emphasized women’s ability (in his opinion superior to that of men) to master the art of conversation: “[that] pleasant and inimitable chatter, in which a man cannot surpass her, either in the salon or in literature (...) Only she [the woman] understands the art of conversation, this light and aimless game of talking, which neither arouses passion nor tires the mind, yet keeps each occupied and leaves a most pleasant impression” (GYULAI [1858] 1908:287). (Parenthetical remarks added – GJ)

¹²For a collection of 19th-century fairy tales by French, German and British women writers cf. KOEHLER et al. 2021.



includes two rhythmic animal tales (ATU 210, ATU 20C), the earliest instances of these tale types in Hungarian literature. Tale types that were common in the oral tradition thus appeared in a particularly sophisticated periodical of aesthetics and literary criticism.

Rózika, Krisztina Szemere's third text, with the genre designation "folktale" (*pórrege*), was the product of a poetic experiment intended to illustrate how a particular sujet can be elaborated in various narrative genres within literature. The initiator of the experiment was her husband, Pál Szemere, the editor of *Muzárion*, and the participants of the experiment (who were prominent writers of the era) rewrote the topic (i.e., Gottlieb Konrad Pfeffel's *Usge und Zacchi, eine japanische Geschichte*) in the following genres, besides folktale: epopee in hexameter, ballad, short story, "comic epic inspired by Ossian," and "fairy comedy." This "folktale" by Krisztina Szemere published in *Muzárion* was intended to show (although for a significant part of the outraged readers unsuccessfully) that the folktale is a genre of narrative (high) literature—or it could have been (GULYÁS 2005, 2006).

Women as writers of tales began to emerge in 19th-century Hungarian culture from the 1850s: initially primarily as translators of tales and later as autonomous authors, abandoning their position of invisible/reclusive translators. As we have seen, Pál Gyulai made concessions regarding women's writing precisely with regard to tales: the publication of tales was acceptable and even recommended for women from the perspective of this system of norms. In the beginning, Andersen's tales were the main inspiration for this creative process. From the 1840s, middle-class Hungarian women encountered Andersen's tales as readers, and from the 1850s, the translation of Andersen's tales became a form of expression in women's writing, followed by the publication of original tales inspired by Andersen's tales.

Róza Csengery (König) (1825–1904) translated Andersen's and Lachambaudie's tales and published them in various magazines in the first half of the 1850s. Her husband, Antal Csengery, a most influential figure of politics and culture of the era, described her in one of his letters as follows: "My wife is also a writer. She translates Andersen's beautiful tales into Hungarian, for children. By the time little Géza is three or four years old, he will receive a large volume of tales. If they are into literature, all women should occupy themselves with such things" – that is, with regard to the nature of women's literary work, in 1854 Csengery already held a view similar to Gyulai's (GULYÁS 2020:111). At the end of 1857, Andersen's tales were published in a separate volume translated by Júlia Szendrey. Szendrey then also published her own tales in contemporary periodicals (SZENDREY 2021). In his polemic on Hungarian women writers, apart from minor reservations, Pál Gyulai clearly acknowledged not only Júlia Szendrey's tale translations but also her original tale published under the title *A kis köpeny története* [The Tale of the Little Robe] (GULYÁS 2020:106–108, 115–128). Júlia Szendrey responded to Gyulai's apocalyptic vision of women's writing with an ironic short story published under the pseudonym "an exasperated dilettante woman writer."¹³

¹³The main character of the short story titled *Pesti Napló No. 61, 62, and 65* (which refers to the newspaper in which Gyulai's essay on women writers appeared) is Klára Beregi, a middle-class mother who, after/besides performing all kinds of domestic duties, is engaged in literary work, with the approving support of her family and surroundings. This idyll is interrupted when one day Mr. Beregi, while reading *Pesti Napló*, learns of the dangers of everything his wife is doing, and Klára's children get teased at school for their mother being a writer. Klára retorts that it is precisely articles like this ("turning every woman writer's pen into a cooking spoon") that disrupt the unity of the family, not her writing (SZENDREY 2021:70–86).



Stephanie Wohl (1846–1889) was a new representative of women writers, actively present in many areas of the cultural-literary public (MÉSZÁROS 2021; TÖRÖK 2022). Some of her tales that reflected Andersen’s influence were also published in the early 1860s in János Arany’s literary magazine (WOHL 1862a, 1862b), and in 1864 Arany wrote a commendation for her *Regekönyve* [Book of Tales] (WOHL 1865), a gesture that obviously had a significant canonizing effect. For that matter, Arany was much more open to the literary work of women than the critic who saw Arany’s poetry as the pinnacle of Hungarian literature, i.e., Pál Gyulai (TÖRÖK 2018). Stephanie Wohl’s story *A nagymama könyvei* [Grandmother’s Books] is also notable for its metanarrative statements about storybooks and storytelling: the books come to life, and a historical tragedy, a literary history, a philosophical treatise, among others, battle with the “plebeian” storybooks, but little Mary’s favorites, *One Thousand and One Nights* and Andersen’s tales, eventually triumph gloriously. The little girl narrator of *Az öreg ház öreg órája* [Old Clock in an Old House] listens to folktales from a cook named Borcsa, just like the little boy in Gyulai’s story *Egy anya* [A Mother], to whom a cook named Boris tells stories, but the two child characters evaluate folktales differently, because in Stephanie Wohl’s tale folktales are already boring: “Tonight, old Borcsa was telling me stories, up until eight o’clock, about all kinds of witches, princesses, Ilona the fairy, but I grew so bored with it. The story of the clock was much more beautiful, and it was a true story, the likes of which I have hardly ever heard in my life.”

The tales of Júlia Szendrey and Stephanie Wohl largely followed the model of Andersen’s tale: this bourgeois, domesticated tale usually depicted the magical in the life-space of middle-class women (and their children), in the microcosm of the house and the garden: through the animistic depiction of sentient and talking objects, plants, small animals (birds, insects, lizards, etc.), it reveals moral-sentimental but sometimes tragic relationships and fates.

As the examples show, in the case of 19th-century middle-class, noble, or bourgeois Hungarian women writers of tales (or, as we will see below, collectors of tales), family relationships (husband, father, brother-in-law, brother, etc.) played an important role, not just on account of the example and possible impetus for private literary creation, but in recognizing and realizing the prospect of reaching the arena of literary publicity (from another perspective, this exceptional opportunity can also be seen as a lack of independence and autonomous action). It seems that in the case of Hungarian women writers, for example, first the translation of Andersen’s tales, and later the publication of original tales under the influence of Andersen’s tales in the 1850–1860s, happened with the tacit support of an influential interpretive community of the era, i.e., the literary circle of Csengery, Gyulai and Arany. But in the second half of the 19th century, after Pál Gyulai’s extremely restrictive proposal that considered women’s entry into the literary field to be socially dangerous, due to the initial constraints of the book market and their exclusion from higher education, women writers of tales were slow to move off the field of children’s literature authorized and designated for them.

GENDERED DIFFERENCES IN TALE-TELLING

In 1860, Pál Gyulai concluded his lecture on the poetic value of folk ballads and the importance of collecting them at the meeting of the Transylvanian Museum Association in Kolozsvár (Cluj) with the following remark: “If I was able to obtain such precious data from a Székely coachman and a servant from Gyalu (Gilău) here, in the midst of my activities in the city: how much more could those who live in the countryside and to whom time and circumstances are more favorable



do” (GYULAI 1860:299). That is, Gyulai’s urban informants included rural men and women from the lower social classes who worked in the city of Cluj, yet in his perception, the ideal terrain for collecting folklore was the village. When in 1861 János Arany noted that Gyulai’s versified tale *Igazság és Hamisság* (Truth and Falsehood, ATU 613) was a fragmentary variant, Gyulai tried to record a complete version: “(...) I did all I could to obtain this tale in its entirety. I failed. I asked children, old women, young girls, nannies, coachmen, in other words, anyone that has ever related a tale to me. All in vain. Even those who did know something about it only remembered fuzzy fragments” (GYULAI 1862a:133). Thus, Gyulai’s potential storytellers were mostly women (old women, young girls, nannies).

The gender of the storyteller may have been important from the perspective of the study of tales because, as comparative studies carried out much later – in the second half of the 20th century – showed, the folklore repertoire of women and men varied from one local community to another, and even within a family. They differed in which subgenres and types within a genre, such as a tale (which may be performed by both men and women, but this is not true for all folklore genres), performers included in their repertoire, or how the same sujet was performed by a male or a female storyteller, as there may have been characteristic differences in the representation of the characters’ motivations, emotions, and relationships, as well as how certain plot elements were played up or down (KILIÁNOVÁ 1999; NAGY I. 2015).

In modern Europe, tales were not necessarily a children’s genre: in popular culture, adults, men and women alike, listened to and related tales, but at the same time, the target audience of certain subgenres of tales (e.g., animal tales, formula tales) was mainly children, and therefore the telling of such tales was also associated with those who took care of children (women, elderly family members, servants, nannies, etc.).

The inclusion of basic data about the storytellers (name, age, occupation, literacy status, especially their level of reading and writing) when recording and publishing the tales became a requirement by the turn of the 20th century in Hungary, adapting the findings of international folkloristics (which was institutionalized as a discipline around this time). At this time, as a result of the extensive collection of tales in the German-speaking area, and perhaps as a kind of counter-reaction to the concept of storytelling being a women’s activity, a number of tale collectors declared that the prominence of women’s storytelling could not be substantiated as their collecting experience showed that most of the prominent storytellers were men (KÖHLER-ZÜLCH 1997:199–201). Women did tell stories, but mostly in the circle of family or friends/neighbors, and from this perspective, the title of the Grimms’ collection, *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*, was perfectly in line with the image of a woman’s role, limited to the family and the household, of which storytelling was also a part.

In his exquisite monograph *Interpretation of Fairy Tales: Danish Folklore in a European Perspective*, Bengt Holbek concluded that storytelling, in its “heyday,” was primarily a cultural practice of men, and only when the role (and prestige) of storytelling in a community began to decline was it taken over by women (HOLBEK 1987:154–157). According to the comparative research of international folkloristics summarized by Linda Dégh, there were more prominent storytellers among men because they had the opportunity to improve their storytelling and performance skills through study and practice, since the best storytellers were typically migrants: those who in the feudal and premodern societies of limited mobility had social and spatial freedom of movement, for this way they were able to build up a larger repertoire of texts, meet great performers, and get involved in storytelling as they reached more and more communities



in their travels. By occupation, these storytellers were typically soldiers, sailors, itinerant tradesmen, beggars, woodsmen, and from the second half of the 19th century, construction and factory laborers. On the other hand, having been displaced from the family household due to their mobility, men would often become members of isolated, culturally inevitably self-sufficient communities (military service, work) where their storytelling skills were particularly in demand and appreciated (DÉGH 1987, 1989:64–119, 1995:62–69).

A reconsideration of the theory of the dominance of male storytellers in 19th-century European folk tradition was proposed by Ines Köhler-Zülch, particularly with regard to the aspects of representation and access (KÖHLER-ZÜLCH 1997:199–209). Information on the identity of 19th-century European storytellers is usually quite incomplete, and general conclusions about the gender of storytellers can only be drawn on the basis of pre-filtered data, gleaned from the notes of contemporary collectors and editors – which is rather circumstantial. On the other hand, with regard to the greater number of male storytellers, it is also worth considering the fact that the vast majority of folklore collectors in the 19th century were middle-class men, so the socio-cultural gap between them and peasant women was much larger. To put it more simply: in the 19th century, it was mostly men that collected, and mostly from men.

Relating to this issue, Risto Järv examined a specific, well-defined corpus, the fairy tales of the Estonian folklore archive, through a quantitative analysis. He sought to find correlations between the gender of the storyteller or collector and whether the protagonist of the fairy tale was a woman or a man. In connection with the approximately five thousand Estonian fairy tale texts recorded between 1816 and 1990, the following peculiarities emerged: the vast majority of the tales were told by women, but before the First World War, when the collectors were almost exclusively men, significantly more tales were collected from men than women. It is conceivable that the gender of the collector may have influenced the gender of the storyteller he was able to collect tales from. Moreover, the subsequent significant increase in the proportion of women storytellers can also be linked to the fact that the fairy tale became more and more established in the popular culture as a genre for children, and it may also have been related to the expansion of literacy and the proliferation of reading materials for children. The correlation between the gender of the storyteller and the gender of the protagonist in Estonian tales turned out to be similar to the findings of Bengt Holbek in connection with Danish tales: men predominantly told tales with a male protagonist (more than 80 percent of the texts are like this), and only a very small proportion of their tales had a female protagonist. For women storytellers, this ratio was different, as women told fewer stories with a female protagonist (46% for Danish, 37% for Estonian tales), and the only major difference in this regard between the pre- and post-World War I material is that women told increasingly more tales with male protagonists. However, a more significant difference that can be observed is that in the period before the First World War, the correspondence between the gender of the storyteller and the protagonist of the tale was much clearer (JÄRV 2005).

INVISIBLE INFORMANTS: 19TH CENTURY HUNGARIAN WOMEN STORYTELLERS

If we are looking to find out who the storytellers in 19th-century Hungarian society were and who was associated with the knowledge of tales, our task is not easy, as the available information is quite limited. The manifestations of oral culture can be explored historically if the



contemporary elite and middle classes recorded them in writing for some reason. In this period, however, Hungarian folklore collectors rarely named their informants, usually only provided local references, such as the name of the settlement or region where the tale originated.

One of the conceptual reasons for this practice may have been the fact that in Herderian and Grimmian conceptions, the texts maintained by oral tradition and thought of as folk poetry were considered to be the creation and property of a *community* (a vaguely defined, monolithic entity perceived as *folk*). Just as a variant delivered on a specific occasion was of secondary importance in relation to the ideal-typical text that could be reconstructed from the network of variants, the person (and thus gender) of the storyteller whose performance made the documentation of folklore possible proved to be irrelevant in the same way. What was important instead was that (s)he come from the proper socio-cultural environment as the ideal tradition-bearer of the assumed pure folklore, i.e., if possible, a person leading a rural lifestyle close to nature, little influenced by literacy and untouched by the effects of civilization and industrialization. Collection of folklore intended to document storytelling as well, but, in accordance with the concept of the *folk*, it wanted to capture the repertoire of storytellers of a specific socio-cultural status, and, having purged these tales of their primary context, represented them in print as closed texts.

The lack of information on the identity of informants in 19th-century Hungarian culture was due to another, technical reason: the editors who published the tales often did not even meet these storytellers, as they received the tales from the collectors via correspondence or other means. Thus, they themselves had no knowledge of the sources and informants of the texts, to which collectors and editors made further modifications anyway during on-site or subsequent transcription, as well as during editing and in the various phases of textualization.

In 19th-century literacy, the main representatives of Hungarian storytellers were stereotypically the *soldier*, and the *old woman* telling stories during easy but monotonous communal work (corn shucking, feather plucking, spinning) (their audiences consisted of adults), as well as the *nanny* and the *mother* (they told stories to children). Just as in Germany, (BLÉCOURT 2010) 19th-century Hungarian press was replete with educational articles (sometimes accompanied by a picture of a storyteller), published with titles such as *Storytellers in the East* (Damascus, Cairo, Constantinople), or simply *Algerian/Tunisian/Serbian storyteller*, presenting the readership with male storytellers who were considered exotic. Approximately two dozen Hungarian women storytellers are known from the 19th century, but in most cases, apart from their names, we hardly know anything about them. Below I summarize basic information on such 19th-century Hungarian storytellers.

Georg von Gaal, who compiled the first collection of Hungarian tales (*Mährchen der Magyaren*, 1822), recorded tales from soldiers stationed in the Austrian capital, Vienna, in the first decades of the 19th century, so this corpus did not include women storytellers. At the same time, in the preface to the volume, Gaal, speaking about the compilation and sources of his collection, lamented that he could not find a storyteller similar to Frau Viehmann, i.e., the storyteller of the Brothers Grimm.¹⁴

¹⁴“Männer von Ansehen und Einfluß, und alle meine Freunde und Bekannte in Ungern bemühten sich lange vergebens, meinem Wunsche zu entsprechen; aber nirgends both sich eine Frau Viehmänninn zu williger Erzählung, nirgends ein Schreiber zu schlichter Aufzeichnung des Erzählten, so leicht auch sonst im Leben Geld und gute Worte Eingang finden; und so mußte denn all meine Liebe und Lust für die Sache ohne Erfolg über ein Jahrzehend auf sich beruhen.” (GAAL 1822: IV–V).



Count János Mailáth, who published a collection of Hungarian tales and legends in German in Brünn (Brno) in 1825, addressed the role of storytellers in his short annotations. According to his conclusion, just like characters and motifs of tales, Hungarian storytelling reflects Eastern characteristics: while in Western Europe tales are mostly told in spinning rooms and children's rooms, among Hungarians they can be collected from herdsmen and soldiers, at night, by the fire, during storytelling events that might last hours. Although the mention of herdsmen and soldiers obviously refers to men's storytelling, in connection with the adoption of tales of foreign origin, Mailáth mentioned a famous woman storyteller from Abaúj County, from whom he heard one of Carlo Gozzi's most beautiful tales.¹⁵

In 1842, as an explanation of a woman's portrait by Miklós Barabás (an eminent painter of the period) in the exclusive pocketbook *Iris*, János Mailáth made a reference to Gilli, a strikingly beautiful Romanian storyteller. According to his memories, he met her years earlier at the house of a Hungarian family, as Gilli was sitting under a linden tree, telling a tale to a little boy and two little girls. Barabás' drawing shows a young woman dressed in an ornate national costume from Torockó (Rimetea) (KOVÁCS 2017).

In Arnold Ipolyi's monumental manuscript collection of tales, compiled between 1847 and 1853 for his *Magyar Mythologia* ('Hungarian Mythology', 1854), inspired by Jacob Grimm, one of the storytellers from northwestern Hungary was Angéla Marczi from Kisudvarnok (Malé Dvorníky), whose storytelling yielded 14 tales and sujet outlines. Around 1850, Ipolyi visited his birthplace, Ipolykeszi (Kosiň nad Ipľom), where he met a "famous woman storyteller" called "deaf Maris," whom Ipolyi's mother also knew well (IPOLYI 2006:57–69; DOMOKOS 2015:84).

In 1891, Sándor Pintér, a lawyer and folktale collector from northern-Hungary, remembered from his childhood – i.e., presumably the 1840–1850s – not only the storytelling of "old groom András [Andrew]" around the bonfire at night but also the tales of "Aunt Panni [Annie]" and "old Mother Cziczelle" in the spinning room (PINTÉR 1891:4–5). Lajos Katona, a prominent researcher of Hungarian folkloristics at the end of the century (LANDGRAF 2021), noted with regard to tales collected by Pintér that some of them show a striking similarity with some texts of a folklore collection published decades earlier, that is, *Népdalok és mondák* [Folk Songs and Narratives] (1846–1848) edited by János Erdélyi, and in fact they might be considered as simply having been transcribed into northern-Hungarian dialect (KATONA 1903:133–134). The outraged Pintér in his open letter to Katona, identified one of his storytellers as an authenticating gesture, and also provided some of the circumstances of the collection: "My abovementioned published tale had been dictated to me in Somosújfalú in the eighties by a 60–65-year-old spinster named Örzse [Lizzy] who was a good storyteller" (PINTÉR 1903:197).

¹⁵"Die magyarischen Erzähler sind eine der vielfachen Spuren der orientalischen Abkunft des Volkes. Gleich den Nachtfablern Arabiens erzählen sie Stunden – ja Nächtelang ohne dass sie oder die Zuhörer ermüden. Am häufigsten sind sie unter Kriegern und Hirten anzutreffen. Die Märchen, die in andern Ländern blos in den Spinn- und Kinderstuben bis auf uns're Zeit erhalten worden, sind in Ungarn vorzüglich auf der Vorhut, bei Wache- und Hirtenfeuern, in den nächtlichen Feldarbeiten dem Untergang entzogen worden. (...) Dem Märchenforscher fällt es auf, dass sich ganz fremde Märchen im Volk ausgebreitet haben, die aber von den Erzählern immer nationalisirt werden. So habe ich von einer berühmten Erzählerin [aus dem Abaújvári Komitat] eines der schönsten Märchen Gozzis gehört; und das Märchen fremden Ursprungs: 'von dem Schwanmädchen' ist in ganz Ungarn bekannt." (MAILÁTH 1825:279–280).



Elek Benedek, born in 1859 in Kisbacon (Băţanii Mici), Transylvania, whose stylized folktale collections published at the end of the 19th century sold hundreds of thousands of copies and fundamentally influenced Hungarian oral tradition, recalled in his autobiography that as a child he listened to tales from a peasant girl named Anis Rigó with great infatuation (BENEDEK 1920:52–53).

In general, editors of Hungarian folktales that were published before 1863 did not identify the storytellers. When in 1863 János Kriza included the names of some storytellers (exclusively men) in the notes to *Vadrózsák, székely népköltési gyűjtemény* [Wild Roses, A Collection of Székely Folk Poetry], it was clearly considered an exception (KRIZA 1863:545). The most significant and canonizing series of folklore publications of the decades between 1872 and 1924 was the *Magyar Népköltési Gyűjtemény* (MNGy) [Collection of Hungarian Folk Poetry]; the editors of its first three volumes (up to 1882) were Pál Gyulai and László Arany.¹⁶ During the 19th century, the *Magyar Népköltési Gyűjtemény*, which (also) published folktale collections, usually presenting a regional corpus (Csongrád County, Székely Land, Somogy County, Transdanubia, etc.), did not disclose the data of tales in a uniform way. Some collectors/editors did not provide any information at all about the published variants, others only named the place of collection and/or possibly indicated the names of the collectors. Even if these procedures varied, they were surprisingly uniform in that, until the early 20th century, none of the tales published in the series of the *Magyar Népköltési Gyűjtemény* disclosed information about the *storyteller*.

Consequently, tales from oral tradition were presented to the reading public in a decontextualized form that disregarded the performative aspects of oral performance, only attaching importance to the local/regional/ethnic characteristics and to the collector performing the change of medium from orality to literacy. The fact that not only the names of the storytellers are missing from the texts but also the date of the recording of the text, suggests that this was also unimportant. This way, the published and thus readable folktales lack not only the necessary performativity of their oral existence but also their historicity. This may be related to the approach that tends to see folklore as an entity that is implicitly “ancient,” timeless, i.e., impervious to the changes of time, while disregarding its socio-cultural embeddedness.

The first Hungarian collections that disclosed information about the circumstances of storytelling and the storytellers were published in the first years of the 20th century (some of the published tales were recorded in the last decades of the 19th century). When Béla Vikár published his collection of folklore from Somogy County (southwestern Hungary), in addition to indicating the location of the collection, he named his informants, including the (exclusively male) storytellers.¹⁷ In the folktale collection of linguistics professor Antal Horger,¹⁸ the vast majority of tales collected from the Hungarian inhabitants of the villages east of Braşov were told

¹⁶Groundwork for the *Collection of Hungarian Folk Poetry* took place from the 1860s on within the framework of the Kisfaludy Society, at the initiative and under the supervision of Pál Gyulai. The editor of the tales and legends was László Arany, while Gyulai was responsible for the other genres. Pál Gyulai and László Arany added annotations to folklore texts. By specifying Hungarian and international variants, they provided data for comparative research, thus individual texts were seen as part of various intertextual networks.

¹⁷For some tales, only the name of the settlement is indicated, so in these cases it is not known who the storyteller was. In this volume, Vikár published his collection from the 1880s to 1899 (VIKÁR 1905).

¹⁸Horger collected the tales in the late 1890s, using shorthand (HORGER 1908).



by men, but there are already some tales collected from women.¹⁹ Apart from their name and place of residence, Horger did not provide more information about the storytellers.²⁰

In terms of identifying informants, the collection of folktales by János Berze Nagy in 1903 and 1904 stands out, presumably related to the fact that Berze Nagy (and especially his mentor, Lajos Katona, who authored the annotations) followed the Finnish school of the historical-geographic method. The work diverged from previous volumes of *Magyar Népköltési Gyűjtemény* in other aspects as well: on the one hand, the volume only contained tales, without adding texts that could be classified as other genres of folklore. On the other hand, it mainly presented the tale repertoire of a single settlement (Besenyőtelek) via numerous informants, that is, it documented the tale knowledge of a village community more intensively than previous publications. At the end of each text, Berze Nagy provided not only the name of the storyteller but also his or her exact or approximate age and occupation. Based on this information, most of the storytellers were women: Anna Dankó (40-year-old cook), Éva Szabó (elderly peasant woman), Klári Győrő (newlywed peasant woman), Örszi Duru (elderly spinster), Julcsa Szabó (35-year-old, literate wife of a carpenter, born in Jászárokszállás, no foreign language knowledge), Julcsa Hörcsikné Szabó (peasant woman), Borcsa Szabó (elderly peasant woman), Kata Demeter (servant), Imréné Bozsik (70-year-old widow), Margit Molnár (elderly peasant widow).²¹

If we examine other representative (scholarly) periodicals that published folktales besides the publications of the *Magyar Népköltési Gyűjtemény*, it can also be considered a general tendency that data on Hungarian storytellers were only published in exceptional cases in the 19th century. Concurrently with the *Magyar Népköltési Gyűjtemény*, the *Magyar Nyelvőr*, a journal of linguistics launched in 1872, regularly published folktales in its columns in the *Folklore* or *Vernacular Traditions* section, primarily as dialectological documentation, up until the 1890s. In these publications, the name of the collector and the place of collection (with the name of the settlement or region) were always indicated, but other data were only very rarely included. The recording and sharing of information about the storytellers was the collector's decision, as there were no explicit editorial requirements in this regard. The editors were only interested in the identity of the storyteller if they detected some kind of linguistic anomaly (and thus an authenticity issue) in the submitted text. The first folktale published in *Magyar Nyelvőr* that included information on the storyteller's identity ("Location: Szent-Márton, narrated by Ferenc Farkas in 1885"), was a text from the 1899 collection of Béla Vikár from Somogy (VIKÁR 1899). Nonetheless, this has not yet become common practice.

Ethnographia, the journal of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society, a professional organization established in 1889, was an important institution in terms of the disciplinary status, self-presentation, and acceptance of the scientific research of folk poetry, including the folktale.

¹⁹Rab Kata, Fejér Györgyné Lőrincz Kata, Rab Ilona, Plockuj Mihályné, Kajcsa Anna, Gires Ilona, Tóth Istvánné Pál Anna, Gödri Anna.

²⁰Antal Horger wrote more extensively about Mihály Fóris Fazekas, the best storyteller of Purcáreni, in his notes to the tales in connection with a unique, entirely narrative folk poem (HORGER 1908:457–458).

²¹The recording of tales took place in 1903–1904. In the introduction, Berze Nagy wrote about the method of collection and the position of the storyteller in the local community: "A storyteller is always the focal point of the gathering and enjoys the authority of a chieftain, whether the recital takes place inside the house or around the fire in the barn. They are the first to drink from the canteen, offered the best tobacco. If the storyteller is an old woman, she commands the household, even if she is not in her own home. This is already their official right." (BERZE NAGY ed. 1907:XI).



Publications of folktales in the representative periodical were rare; the editors focused more on the interpretation of tales. In general, however, up until the First World War, even in *Ethnographia*, information on storytellers and storytelling, as well as the conditions of text recording, was disclosed only in exceptional cases. In 1900, Béla Vikár published an excerpt from his collection of tales from Somogy, at the end of which, just as in *Magyar Nyelvőr*, he provided the name of the storyteller (Ferenc Farkas) (VIKÁR 1900; LANDGRAF 2010). The methodological innovation of this collection was that Vikár transcribed some of the texts in shorthand, and recorded others with a phonograph. The phonograph allowed for a different quality of textual fidelity than the usual transcription from dictation or memory recall: it documented the linguistic characteristics of the individual performance. At the same time, for the tales published in the subsequent years, the periodicals once again indicated only the name of the collector and the place of collection (village, county).

In fact, it was only from the 20th century, with the adaptation of the Folklore Fellows' collection guidelines, that the indication of data on the storyteller and the circumstances of the tale's recording became a norm; henceforth, the tales collected from female and male storytellers could be better distinguished. This is how the text *Bumbrlicsek: Tót mese* [Bumbrlicsek: A Slovak Tale], for example, was published in *Ethnographia* as a sample from the Folklore Fellows collections, accompanied by Sándor Solymosy's comparative notes, with the following comment: "The tale was recited to B. M., a teacher from Vágújhely (Nové Mesto nad Váhom), in December 1918 in Slovak by an old woodcutter, noting that he had heard it in his childhood from apprentices" (NN 1918:248). In 1921, two tales of Juli Molnár, an "old woman" from Lengyeltót, were published, in Ilonka Takáts' transcription (NN 1921).

WOMEN COLLECTORS OF FOLKTALES IN THE 19TH CENTURY

As regards the reference to tales transcribed by "B. M., teacher from Vágújhely" and Ilonka Takáts, the role of women in collecting tales must be addressed. From the middle of the 20th century, with the establishment of institutional, university-level education in folkloristics, an increasing proportion of Hungarian folktale collectors were women (Linda Dégh, Ágnes Kovács, Olga Belatini Braun, Judit Földyné Virány, Ilona Dobos, Ilona Nagy, Veronika Görög-Karády, Olga Nagy, Gabriella Vöő, Magda Szapu, Olga Penavin, Judit Raffai). Prior to this, however, women played a negligible role in recording Hungarian folktales, even though the Hungarian Ethnographic Society included women members from the start (LANDGRAF 2019).

A prerequisite for collection and successful text recording is the building of trust between the informant and the collector, even if the interaction between collector and informant often reflected power relations. Since reciting a fairy tale takes much longer and requires more concentration than, for example, singing a song, and also because the storytelling, plot development, and performance style are influenced by the reactions of the audience, the minimalization of alienation, cultural and social barriers, and inhibitions between the collector and the storyteller would have been particularly important. Sensing this, in 1914 Gyula Sebestyén (folklorist, vice-president of the Hungarian Ethnographic Society, president of the Hungarian Department of Folklore Fellows) saw one of the innovations of the folklore collection coordinated by the Folklore Fellows precisely in the fact that it involved "young students who come from the folk and who occasionally return to the folk" in the collection instead of/in addition to the



distinguished, “well-dressed, begloved, bespectacled, aging collectors,” thereby diminishing the “differences separating them from the simple folk” for the sake of the success of the collection (SEBESTYÉN 1914:143).

In 19th-century Hungary, we know of even fewer women collectors of tales than women storytellers, that is, women who for some reason recorded folktales. One of the reasons for this may have been the lower level of education of women, which was limited to a rather narrow circle of women to begin with. On the one hand, from a technical point of view, transcribing a long fairy tale (typically preferred by collectors at the time, to the detriment of other tale genres) was a time-consuming task that required significant concentration, that is, reliable writing skills and significant (non-occasional) writing practice. On the other hand, in order to take on such a task, one had to/should have known that these tales, considered lowly in Hungarian public opinion, had value in some way, thus they were worthy of recording. In other words, one had to/should have been familiar with the partially informal, partially public discourse that emerged in certain interpretive groups of 19th-century intellectuals in connection with the interpretation of folklore, and within that, folktales. It was possible to partially learn of these developments through the press (for example, the Kisfaludy Society published its call for the nationwide folklore collection in the newspapers repeatedly), but since the press products created for middle-class women readers – containing special literary works, educational writings, and society news – only conveyed these through heavy filtering, it is doubtful that this would have been a sufficient incentive for women who learned about the value of folklore to actively participate in the process of recording tales.

Moreover, it must also be taken into consideration that a significant number of folktale collections in the 19th century took place as a part of collection networks. The initiators would come up with the idea of collection, and then, through their personal or institutional network of contacts, they would involve others in the collection of folklore, directing their work, then selecting, shaping, and organizing the submitted manuscripts into a corpus, and finally preparing and arranging their publication (usually in the position of editor of the published collection). These collection networks were built on the system of relations of men connected to various educational institutions, their social position, or their work. Georg von Gaal, for example, as the librarian of the count Esterházy family at the turn of the 1820s, was able to record tales from Hungarian soldiers stationed in Vienna. Later, in the middle of the 19th century, János Kriza, as a Unitarian pastor and later bishop in Cluj, involved Transylvanian Unitarian pastors and teachers in the collection. As a parish priest, Arnold Ipolyi relied on Roman Catholic priests, teachers, and monks in addition to his acquaintances. Gábor Kazinczy mobilized members of the local intelligentsia on his estate in Borsod. As high school teachers in Cluj and Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureș), Pál Gyulai and Sámuel Szabó gave their students the recording of folklore texts as an assignment (SZAKÁL 2021). The leaders of the collection networks were therefore able to mobilize their (institutional) connections, where their fellow collectors were persons of equal rank or subordinated to them in the social hierarchy.

In 19th-century Hungarian society, the social network of women was much more limited due to the lack of public schooling and workplaces independent of the domestic sphere, and mostly only extended to the circle of family and friends, so it was not only unlikely for women to build a network for folklore collection but also to be members of such a network. Finally, the contemporary social norms that limited women’s contact and communication with strangers, as well as their spatial mobility, also made it harder for women to record folktales.



In the European context, an eminent collector of folktales in the 19th century was Laura Gonzenbach (1842–1878), who was born in Switzerland, lived in Messina, came from a family of merchants and diplomats, spoke several languages, and published her two-volume collection of Sicilian fairy tales in German in 1870. This collection contained mostly tales of peasant and lower-middle-class women from eastern Sicily, most of the tales were about female characters, and the narration reflected “raw orality” rather than some sort of enhanced, polished literary style; that is, the female perspective emerged intensely in this 19th-century collection (SCHENDA 1987; ZIPES 2003, 2006).

Regarding Hungarian folktale collectors, as we have seen, there were few women storytellers and even fewer tale collectors in the 19th century. That is why, thanks to a manuscript discovered after the Second World War, the biographies and text recording activities of at least two tale collectors/storytellers, namely Julianna Ercsey (1818–1885) and Juliska Arany (1841–1865), are relatively well documented (in comparison to other contemporary women storytellers and collectors). This is obviously also due to the distinguished position of these two women, mother and daughter; as family members of the most significant poet of the second half of the 19th century (János Arany) and the collector and interpreter of folktales (László Arany), there are more sources than usual available about them, through which, as well as the manuscripts, their process of recording tales could be at least partially revealed. Juliska Arany recorded seventeen tales and her mother five very long tales in the 1850s. The tales were restyled by László Arany and published under his editorship in 1862. The volume *Eredeti népmesék* [Authentic Folktales], as mentioned in the introduction of this essay, is one of the most influential collections of Hungarian folktales and has been at the center of the folkloristic canon from the start. However, the contribution of Julianna Ercsey and Juliska Arany to the creation of this tale collection remained unknown for a century (GULYÁS 2021b). In Transylvania in the 1860s, a member of János Kriza’s folklore collection network of Unitarian teachers and pastors, Mihály Kiss referred to his wife, Julianna Barabás, as his “ocularis Mentorissa” because she helped him in the textualization of the collected folktales (SZAKÁL 2013:102, 320).

In 1872, in the first volume of the *Collection of Hungarian Folk Poetry*, the editor László Arany listed a woman’s name (Katica Bodros) as the collector of three tales, but in his notes, he also indicated that this was actually a pseudonym (ARANY – GYULAI eds. 1872:432, 452, 487). Theoretically, the pseudonymous collector could have been either a man or a woman, but men rarely used female pseudonyms to hide their identity, while its reverse was common practice, so it seems more likely that the collector of these tales was a woman. The identity of Katica Bodros, the tale collector, is still unknown.

In the same year, in 1872, Julia Pfeiffer published two folktales from western Hungary in the columns of *Magyar Nyelvőr*, and then in the 1870s, some more of her tales were published (PFEIFFER 1872a, 1872b, 1873, 1874a, 1874b). In the same place, under the name of Eszti Sipos, further folktales from western Hungary were also published (SIPÓS 1873, 1878), along with several other folklore-related publications (data on vernacular religion, folk songs, place names). We do not have any further information about Julia Pfeiffer and Eszter Sipos at the moment. At the same time, the texts published as *Párbeszéd* [Dialogue] are noteworthy among their publications, which record the conversations of village people on various topics (the difficulties of working flax, did a letter arrive at the post office, who should deliver a marriage proposal, a request to the reverend for a son to be tutored, hiring servants, discussing ailments, etc.), primarily in order to document dialectic and phonetic peculiarities, in line with the periodical’s



linguistic interest. Today, these texts reflecting the spontaneity of oral communication can also be seen as rare examples of the ethnography of speaking, the recording of which obviously required the collector to be present in these everyday situations and taking notes unobtrusively (SIPOS 1873, 1874, 1875; PFEIFFER 1873).

It must be noted that the names of women storytellers and tale collectors were often used in a familiar/diminutive form in both popular and scholarly publications, such as the following of the abovementioned storytellers and collectors (registered formal first name in parentheses): Maris (Mária/Mary), Panni (Anna/Anne), Eszti (Eszter/Esther), Katica (Katalin/Catherine), Juliska, Julcsa (Julianna/Julia), Klári (Klára/Claire), Örszi (Erzsébet/Elizabeth), Borcsa (Borbála/Barbara), Ilonka (Ilona/Helena). This practice was not applied in the naming of men.

In the context of tale collectors and familial relationships, it is worth noting that some significant folklore collectors of the turn of the 20th century, such as Béla Vikár and János Berze Nagy, who also contributed to the *Collection of Hungarian Folk Poetry* series, were assisted in their collection by their wives and/or mothers (Veronika Szomjú, Júlia Krekács, Emma Losonczy), although details of in what way and to what extent are not known (VIKÁR 1905:XI–XII; DOMOKOS 2016:543).

Of course, the gender of storytellers and collectors may have influenced collection not just in the 19th century, but even later, such as the middle of the 20th century. This is well illustrated by the case of Ágnes Kovács, who, as a university student of Gyula Ortutay, collected tales in the village of Ketesd (Tetișu) in Transylvania in the early 1940s. In comparison to previously published local folktale collections, the uniqueness of the Ketesd community lied in the fact that storytelling was a practice common to almost all groups of the village community, while the most prestigious storytelling, that is, the telling of fairy tales by men during communal work, remained inaccessible to the women of the village as well as to the collector. The young, 20-year-old Ágnes Kovács commented on this situation as follows: “Women storytellers are not taken seriously. It is only considered »real« storytelling if the audience consists of adult men. We can go even further than this: women are not even allowed to be present at corn shucking – the occasion that is primarily associated with storytelling in the minds of the people of Ketesd. The collector was no exception to this (...) Maybe if I had really pushed, they would have invited me, but when I saw how they kept dodging my suggestions, I contented myself with compiling the course of this custom that had not received much attention until now based on their descriptions and my other experiences” (KOVÁCS 1944:33).

IN SUMMARY

Was the tale a women’s genre? In modern European popular (oral) culture, both women and men told tales; the difference between women’s and men’s storytelling was more evident in the use of individual subgenres and types of tale. In the performances of prominent storytellers, tales were a distinguished manifestation of *verbal art*. As we have seen, there were many forms in which the connection between women and tales could be manifested: besides oral storytelling, in the scribal medium the translation and writing of tales were also possible paths in addition to documenting oral traditions; this, however, required an appropriate level of education and literacy, which in Hungarian society was only available to a fraction of women excluded from



secondary and higher-level formal education until the mid- to late 19th century. The 19th century was the period in Hungarian society when the genre of the (fairy) tale, previously considered lowly by representatives of the elite culture and clearly classified in the low register of popular culture, emerged in a new framework of interpretation: as a possible new genre of romantic literature based on magic and fantasy, as one of the central genres of the idealized and nostalgized folk poetry, and as a genre of Hungarian-language children's literature.

In elite culture, in the field of literature, the connection of women and tales was due to several factors. On the one hand, a short prose fiction narrative did not require the kind of poetic and rhetorical training which formal (higher) education, only available to men until the late 19th century, could equip authors with. On the other hand, due to its marginal position in the literary canon, the tale was a harmless and, in fact, weightless genre, therefore suitable for (women) authors classified as problematic. Thirdly, the tale, increasingly classified as part of the emerging children's literature, fit into the life path of middle-class women limited to household management, child care, and child rearing. I have tried to illustrate what a complex issue this was, and what diverse cultural practices have historically evolved around the genre of tale in Hungary, which by the end of the 19th century (and since then) have been mostly forgotten with the narrowing of the tale canon.

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